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Life (Movie Review)

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Abstract

"Given the name 'Life,' the title of this new outer-space science-fiction thriller, I was looking for a grand artistic gesture."

Posting about the movie *Life* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/life/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Josh Matthews

Given the name “Life,” the title of this new outer-space science-fiction thriller, I was looking for a grand artistic gesture. I wanted a movie about all the vast complexities involved in the purpose of life itself. Something that would make us all ponder the very meaning and fabric of existence. Yes, you can’t expect “Hamlet” or “Citizen Kane” with every flick. But the marketers of “*Life*” seem to tell us that this movie offers everything.

Unfortunately, all “Life” gives us is Calvin.

This is not the Calvin you are thinking of. You might think of something enjoyable, such as the Calvin of *Calvin and Hobbes*, but you’d be wrong. The works of John Calvin? Wildly entertaining compared to this movie. Anything to do with Calvin Coolidge? An explosion of aesthetic pleasure compared to this movie.

Rather, Calvin is the nickname of the Martian creature in “Life” who is reanimated on an International Space Station. Orbiting somewhere above Earth in the very near-future, the station captures a sample of a hibernating single-cell organism from Mars. An onboard team of scientists study Calvin first. The scientists are played by Ryan Reynolds, Jake Gyllenhaal, and several other capable actors, who get nothing better to do in this flick than to float around a lot.

Since this is the first human contact with life beyond Earth, the space station rejoices at the monumental discovery. The whole Earth rejoices. Times Square explodes in celebration over Calvin’s arrival. Meanwhile, the scientists on the station keep Calvin as an experimental pet. He’s a cuddly little guy who grows rapidly into a parasitical-looking creature, but no worries. As one scientist says, “he’s all muscle, all nerve, all eye, and all brain.” Ah, man’s new best friend.

Because “Life” exists in a world where the scientists have not seen “War of the Worlds,” “Alien,” or “The Thing,” they trust Calvin completely. The plot of “Life” requires them to act as complete idiots, and it asks us to believe that they could be such. They have no second thoughts about handling Calvin or about letting him grow. They are scientists with big hearts and no brains.

Alas, Calvin is not a very nice pet. He first breaks the hand of a scientist, then goes after another one, who gets to show us what gallons of blood look like floating in space. At this point, “Life” turns into a dull horror movie and blatantly rips off the aforementioned movies. The space station’s ultra-tight quarters mean that Calvin gets to exploit everyone’s claustrophobia. Perhaps Calvin is the only one familiar with “Alien,” because he decides to hunt down the crewmembers one by one. Given the frequency with which movie monsters employ it, that must be their most effective survival strategy, bless their little alien hearts—if they have them.

I should mention that Calvin’s body evolves during this movie. He begins as a single-cell creature, then later grows up into a small eel-like starfish. Then he turns into an outer-space octopus, and finally, he becomes the small, luminescent dragon-like thing that he always wanted to be. He is, as all science-fiction movie monsters are, perfectly adapted to the necessities of the screenplay and the set. He can be burned with torches and deprived of oxygen. He survives quite well in the vacuum of space. Who knows why he is attacking the crew? Maybe it’s all just a misunderstood Martian hello.

Because the screenplay assumes that we are dumb, it does not make any grand artistic gestures about life itself. Early in the movie, one character says that we ought to trust Calvin because “he is not anthrax.” Later, when Calvin becomes a serial-killing alien, the crew can’t figure out a way to get rid of their pest. For comfort, they turn to—of all things—the children’s book *Goodnight Moon*. When they read *Goodnight Moon*, they find their meaning and purpose. They arrive at the line “Goodnight nobody,” and, gee whiz, this describes their bleak existence. But when

they read the line “Goodnight air,” hey, they say, we know how to get rid of Calvin! As you might imagine, the ending of this movie is better seen than believed, although I wish that I could un-see it.

My choice this weekend was to see either “Life” or “Power Rangers,” a movie that tries to reinvigorate the cheesy 1990s TV franchise. I have concluded that I not only made the wrong choice, but that, if aliens demanded that we send them only one of these two movies to represent all of the complex cultural achievements of the last 5,000 years of human civilization, “Power Rangers” would be the wiser choice. “Life” would definitely insult them. If they knew it, they would probably end up quoting that famous line about “life is a tale” from *MacBeth*, although I can’t remember it now, having been made too braindead by the screenplay of “Life” to recall the entire thing.